TAGORE LECTURES

1973

K. P. K. MENON

ANNAMALAI UNIVERSITY

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K. P. K. MENON
Retired Head, Institute of English
University of Kerala.

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TAGORE THE POET OF MAN

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1. The inadequacy of judging Tagore as a poet from the English translations of his poems

There is a certain unreality in one not well versed in Bengali speaking or writing about Rabindranath Tagore. Of the large bulk of his writings—they include over 2000 songs, more than 150,000 lines of verse,[1] and a prodigious volume of prose in the form of novels, short stories, essays etc.,—almost everything was originally written in Bengali. Only a part of this prolific output has been rendered into English. Any estimate, therefore, based on the English translations only is bound to be, at best, incomplete and inadequate.

It is a generally accepted fact that poetry, by its very nature, is untranslatable. Ideas and thoughts can be translated, but these are not the most poetic part of poetry. As Mallarme pointed out, poetry is written not with ideas, but with words. A. E. Houseman put the same idea in other words when he said, "Poetry is not the thing said, but a way of saying it." And the way of saying a thing constitutes the magic of poetry. And this evanescent and intangible quality is

> like poppies spread:
> You seize the flower, its bloom is shed;
> ....
> Or like the Borealis race
> That flit ere you can point their place.

The *Gitanjali* verses in their original Bengali, as reported to W. B. Yeats by his Indian friends, are

> fully of subtlety of rhythm, of untranslateable delicacies of colour.[2]

What is true of *Gitanjali* is true of all the poems of Tagore, they are richly decked in all the intricate beauties of tune and rhythm and the subtle blending of rhyme. Translation from Bengali, we are

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1 Hiren Mukerjee thinks that Edward Thompson's estimate of 150,000 lines of verse "erred on the side of understatement." *Himself a True Poem* (People's Publishing House, 1961), p. 35.

2 W. B. Yeats, Introduction to the English *Gitanjali* (Macmillan, 1945), p. xiii.

told, is especially difficult as the language "is more than usually coy and unwilling to yield her secret in alien vestments." [3]

Again, another difficulty of the reader of the English versions of the poems is that they are not really translations, but "semi-poetic (sometimes pseudo-poetic) summaries and paraphrases, much truncated in body and emasculated in spirit and without the slightest suggestion of his metrical variety and virility. They gave little, and often they gave a wrong idea of the best that Tagore could do." [4] What Tagore himself has given us are not translations of his poems. He tried to re-live the moments which led to the creation of his Bengali poems and express himself anew in English. The result is that the English renderings are often very different from their Bengali originals. Any evaluation based on these imperfect translations is therefore unlikely to do justice to the poet.

2. The making of a poet

If any poet was born to be a poet it was Rabindranath. The ancestral home of the Tagores was a nest of singing birds. The house hummed with literary and artistic activity of every kind. Singing, dancing, story-telling, play-acting and painting went on almost incessantly in the secluded boudoirs, the broad verandahs and the spacious courtyards and terraces of that sprawling building. And what an amazing family the Tagores were! Rabindranath's grandfather, Dwarakanath, had become a fabulous figure by his daring defiance of every orthodox Hindu custom and convention and his collaboration with Raja Rammohan Roy. Maharshi Devendranath, the poet's father, was a profound Sanskrit scholar and a man of lofty integrity of character. His mother, Sharada Devi, was a voracious reader, and it is said that while she did her domestic work with one hand she had a book in the other. Rabindranath's uncle, Girindranath, was a playwright and he had his own touring dramatic club. The poet's eldest brother, Dwijendranath, wrote beautiful poems and he was a great philosopher. Another brother, Satyendranath, was the first Indian to pass the I. C. S. Examination. Jyotirindranath, yet another brother, was an excellent musician, poet and dramatist.

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3 Hiren Mukerjee, *Himself a True Poem*, p. 13.
4 See J. C. Ghosh, *Bengali Literature* (Oxford, 1948), pp. 171, 173.

A sister, Swarnakumari Devi, was the first Bengali woman to write many novels and poems. Jyotirindranath's wife, Kadambari Devi, two years senior to Rabindranath, was his close companion and she exercised a great influence on him. There were also other near relatives who made a mark in the artistic and intellectual life of Bengal. Gaganendranath and Abanindranath were pioneers in painting and revived the art which had languished under British Raj. Even the illiterate servants of the household could recite the Ramayana or tell stories of their own invention.

The poet was also inspired in his early days by the sublime scenery of the Himalayas which he visited in the company of his father. Another edifying influence was his residence in the riverine countryside in his own province of Bengal, "a land of lush, luxuriant vegetation, of kingfishers darting about in speckled splendour and kites soaring in mock serenity, of sandbanks stretched out in lazy streams like flattened hippopotami, of sails drifting dreamily along waters tenderly lapping away."[5] Both at at Shailada on the Padma and at Chandernagore, he drank to the full the beauty of nature:

> The Ganges again ! [he exclaims on recalling his stay at Chandernagore]. Again those ineffable days and nights, languid with joy and with longing, attuned to the plaintive babbling of the river along the cool shade of its wooded banks. This Bengal sky full of light, this south breeze, this flow of the river, this right royal laziness, this broad leisure stretching from horizon to horizon and from green earth to blue sky, all these were to me as food and drink to the hungry and thirsty. Here it felt indeed like home, and in these I recognized the ministrations of a Mother.[6]

Fostered in such congenial surroundings and by such inspiring influences his soul had a fair seedtime. And to complete his initiation into poetry he had a mystic vision that left its impress on all his later work. He was twenty-three. One

5 Hiren Mukerjee, *Himself a True Poem*, p. 40.

6 Rabindranath Tagore, *Reminiscences*. Macmillan, 1946), p. 208.

morning, while he was standing on the verandah of his residence in Sudder Street, Calcutta, watching the sun rise behind the trees,

> all of a sudden a covering seemed to fall away from my eyes, and I found the world bathed in a wonderful radiance, with waves of beauty and joy swelling on every side. This radiance pierced in a moment through the folds of sadness and despondency whtch had accumulated over my heart, and flooded it with this universal light.
>
> That very day the poem, *The Awakening of the Waterfall* gushed forth and coursed on like a veritable cascade. The poem came to an end, but the curtain did not fall upon the joy aspect of the Universe. And it came to be so that no person or thing in the world seemed to me trivial or unpleasing. [7]

3. His best known work Gitanjali is not one of his characteristic works which deal with man

Thus Rabindranath blossomed into a full-blown poet. But it is one of the strangest ironies of fate that a poet with such a prodigious variety and volume of output should be known outside Bengal—in India and abroad—as just the poet of the English *Gitanjali*, a slender volume of prose poems on religio-mystical themes. Of this world-famous volume we are told that

> to many sensitive Bengalis it was not typical of Rabindranath's work; it was as if written when he had exiled himself from the haunts of man where alone he had his true home.[8]

This brings me to the subject proper of my lecture, Tagore the Poet of Man, for whatever else he was—and he was many things else—he was first and last, from first to last, essentially the Poet of Man.

The impression left by the English translation of *Gitanjali* and a few other volumes of his poems by which he is mainly known

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7 *Reminiscences*, pp. 217-218.

8 Hiren Mukerjee, *Himself a True Poem*, p. 55.

outside Bengal is that he was a poet plying his trade in the solitude and isolation of the proverbial ivory tower, that he found beauty in the lofty mountains, the round ocean and the blue sky, the rising and the setting sun, and all the objects of the mighty world of eye and ear, that he believed in a supreme principle pervading the whole universe and that he sought communion with a being that was the embodiment of love and sympathy. No doubt he was a pantheist, a philosopher and a prophet. In fact one word has often been profaned with reference to Tagore as a poet—the word mystic. But this conception tends to make us ignore the essential fact that more than all these he was a realist and a humanist, vitally interested in life and man, and responsive to all that happened in his own province, his country and the whole world. His poetry, from the beginning to the end of his life, shows that he believed that the proper study of mankind is man. As one of his recent critics says :

> In the pre-Gitanjali period he studies man in relation to Nature. In the Gitanjaii period, he studies man in relation to God. In the post-Gitanjali period, he studies man in relation to man.[9]

4. Tagore not a dreamy mystic

That even in his youth Tagore was no mere dreamy mystic, no idle singer of an empty day, is clear from the fact that his father chose him, when he was about twenty, to manage the family estate, although he was the youngest of fourteen children. We are told that during about ten years that he did this work "he displayed efficiency as well as consideration for the human dignity of his tenants."[10]

During these early years when he lived often in Shailada on the Padma, "the far-famed Ganga's deep-bosomed and

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9 B. C. Chakravorty, *Rabindranath Tagore, His Mind and Art* (Young India Publications, New Delhi, 1971), p. 66.

10 Hiren Mukerjee, *Himself a True Poem*, p. 40. Dr. Sachin Sen (*The Political Thought af Tagore*, General Printers and Publishers, Calcutta, pp. 5-6) quotes from an official report of a much later date to show that in the poet's property was seen "a very favourable example of estate government."

wayward half-sister,"[11] when he was passing through the first stage of his realization by "intimacy with nature,"[12] when the sublime manifestations of nature like the mighty mountains and the vast oceans cast their undoubted spell on him, he was more touched by nature as she came closer to human haunts :

> His rivers are not left for long without a sail on their surfaces; they flow by meadow and pasture. His flowers and bees are in garden and orchard; his 'forest' is at the hamlet's door. His fellow-men were a necessity to him. [13]

The poet himself makes this admission in his *Reminiscences*:

> I strained with the same yearning towards the world of man in my youth, as I did in my childhood towards outside nature from within the chalk-ring drawn round me by the servants. [14]

5. To Tagore this life and its joys were real

To Tagore life in this world was no mere probation for life in a better world. Many poets and philosophers have looked upon this world as an inn or caravanserai where we stay for a time before we return to our permanent home in heaven. But to Tagore life is a gift of God to be enjoyed, for this earth provides a variety of joys to the senses. In his early work *Sharps and Flats* he says:

> This world is sweet,—I do not want to die. I wish to dwell in this ever-living life of Man.

In *Naivedya*

> the poet's ache for the fulness of living is apparent: not for him was renunciation, for life drew him 'by the strings of grief, the pull of desire'. [15]

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11 *Himself a True Poem*, p. 40.

12 Tagore, *Religion of Man*, Fourth Impression, p. 18.

13 Edward Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore, Poet and Dramatist*, 1948, pp. 25-26.

14 *Reminiscences* (Macmillan, 1946), p. 270.

15 *Himself a True Poem*, p. 59.

In *Gitanjali* he expresses this view again:

> It have had my invitation to this world's festival, and thus my life has been blessed. My eyes have seen and my ears have heard. [16]

And again,

> The entire sky and the entire earth
> Are filled with joy and smile.
>
> To whatever side I cast my eyes
> Everything is as fine is it could be. [17]

Tagore might have said with Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi:

> This world's no blot for us,
> Nor blank—it means intensely and means good:
> To find its meaning is my meat and drink.

To Tagore, therefore, this world and life in it were sources of infinite joy and the best way of deliverance is not by the worship of God with "chanting and singing and telling of beads" in a "lovely dark corner of a temple," but living in this world and doing the duties of life. There is no question of "deliverance" from this world;

> Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found? Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation; he is bound with us all for ever. [18]

There is no trace of asceticism or the spirit of renunciation in his attitude towards life. To quote again from *Gitanjali*:

> Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.
>
> Thou ever pourest for me the fresh draught of thy wine of various colours and fragrance, filling this earthen vessel to the brim.

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16 *Gitanjali*, No. 16, p. 13.

17 *Gitanjali*, (in Bengali) No. 45 quoted by Hirenmay Banerjee, *How Thou Singest My Master* (Orient Longmans, 1961), p. 121.

18 *Gitanjali* (English) No. 11, p. 9.

> No, I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight.
>
> Yes, all my illusions will burn into illumination of joy, and all my desires ripen into fruits of love.[19]

6. But his sensuousness and his spiritualism are harmonised

The last sentence of the passage just quoted shows clearly that the joys of life on which the poet sets the highest store are not sensual. Desires are sublimated into love, and through the joys of the sense he will purify the spirit and reach God. Thus there is a happy reconciliation between the senses and the spirit. He achieves a "synthesis between the super-sensuous and the sensuous worlds," or what has been called spiritual realism."[20]

There is thus no contradiction between Tagore's humanism and his mysticism. He steers clear of hedonism on the one hand and asceticism on the other, and effects a harmony between matter and spirit. The poet of man and the poet of God blend as

> the rose
> Blendeth its odour with the violet.

The union between man and God, which illustrates the spiritual realism of the poet, is beautifully described in *Gitanjali*. It is not a one-sided love. At first the poet who is eager for union with God is afraid that such a union is not possible, for he is an insignificant being while God is the King of Kings.[21] Slowly but steadily, the hesitation is overcome, and the union takes places as between equals. The longing for union is mutual, for God seeks for man's love as much as man seeks for God's love; in fact God humbles Himself to win the poet's heart:

> Thus it is that thy joy in me is so full. Thus it is that thou hast come down to me. O Thou Lord of all heavens, where would be thy love if I were not ?

---

19 *Gitanjali*, (English) No. 73, p. 68.

20 B. C. Chakravorti, *Rabindranath Tagore, His Mind and Art*, p. 64.

21 *Gitanjali*, No. 77, pp. 71–72.

> Thou hast taken me as thy partner of all this wealth. In my heart is the endless play of thy delight. In my life thy will is ever taking shape.
>
> And for this, thou who art the King of kings has decked thyself in beauty to captivitate my heart. And for this thy love loses itself in the love of thy lover, and there art thou seen in the perfect union of two. [22]

I shall conclude this section with two prose quotations from Tagore which establish my point—that the poet of God is not a separate entity from the poet of man:

> ... even when so young I had that idea which was to grow with my life all along, of realizing the Infinite in the finite, and not, as some of our metaphysicicians do, eliminating the finite.
>
> ... the idea of the humanity of our God or the divinity of Man the Eternal, is the main subject of this book. [23]

It was, however, only towards the turn of the century, when he was about forty years old, that his interest in man crystallised into active interest in social questions, when "he had outgrown his purely literary vocation and come increasingly to play the role of a leader, guiding the nation's thoughts." [24]

7. His faith that service to humanity, specially stricken humanity, is the best way of serving and reaching God

The close relationship between his spiritualism and his interest in man is revealed by his faith that the best way of serving and reaching God is by serving man, especially stricken humanity, the destitute and the underprivileged. This realization came to him in the *Gitanjali* period. God does not appear before the man who worships Him with prayers and hymns:

> He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking hard stones. He is with them in the sun and the shower, and his

22 *Ibid.*, No. 56, pp. 51–52.

23 Rabindranath Tagore, *Religion of Man* (Fourth Impression). p. 17.

24 Sasadhar Sinha, *Social Thinking of Rabindranath Tagore* (Asia Publishing House, 1962), p. 137.

garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil. [25]

In the original Bengali *Gitanjali* there is a poem which has been translated thus:

Where Thou art in union with the multitude
I shall seek union with Thee.
Neither in the forest nor in solitude
Nor inside my own mind,
But where Thou art the beloved of everybody
Thou art my beloved too. [26]

"The peasants, fishermen, Santals and shepherds he had included in the themes of his early songs. But hitherto he had viewed them in isolation from their social milieu." [27] But after 1930 his poems are full of references tō the hewers of wood and drawers of water, and his heart goes out to the afflicted sections of society. In one of his poems, "Snan Samapan" (Finishing Bath), in the collection entitled *Punascha* (1934) he deals with the theme of untouchability. Ramanand who belongs to a high caste cannot purify himself although he bathes in the Ganges, but when he embraces the untouchable Bhajan, he becomes pure.

Towards the end of his life Tagore seems to have become painfully conscious that he had been guilty of standing apart from the common men and women. In "The Great Symphony", a poem written on January 21, 1941, a few months before his death, he says:

Not everywhere have I won access,
My ways of life have intervened
And kept me outside
The tiller at the plough,
The weaver at the loom,
The fisherman plying the net,

---

25 *Gitanjali*, No, 11, p. 9.

26 *Gitanjali*, *Tagore's Works*, (Bengali), Vol. XI, p. 61, quoted in Hirenmay Banerjee's *How Thou Singest My Master*, p. 121.

27 Rajendra Verma, *Tagore, Prophet against Totalitarianism* (Asia Publishing House, 1964), p. 53.

These and the rest
Toil and sustain the world
With their world-wide varied labour. [28]

In another poem, "The Toilers", written a few days later, 13 February 1941, he says:

They pull the oars and they plough,
In meadow after meadow
They sow and they reap.
In town and country they work. [29]

8. **His humanism as seen in his response to events in India**

Tagore's humanism is seen, again, in his sensitive response to the events of the world around him. Never was there a more ardent patriot than he. Of his active participation in the agitation against the partition of Bengal in Lord Curzon's time, his advocacy of the Swadeshi movement, the starting of Sri Niketan, his giving up his knighthood in protest against the Jallianwalla massacre etc., this is not the occasion to speak. We are here concerned only with the poems inspired by the events around him.

The first session of the Indian National Congress held in 1886 was inaugurated with a song composed and recited by Tagore. It began with the line, "We meet today at the call of the Mother." In 1883 he wrote a number of patriotic poems like "Desher Unnati" (Uplift of the Nation), "Bangabir" (The Heroes of Bengal) and "Duranta Asha" (Wild Hopes). In this last poem, he denounces with biting sarcasm the cowardice, submissiveness and inactivity of his countrymen:

With face smile-wreathed in happiness of slavery, with palms obsequiously joined, let your body writhe at your master's foot in ecstasy at his caress! Rolling before his shoes, pick up bread buttered with contempt, fill your fist greedily and go home! There sit and brag

---

28 Quoted from Rajendra Verma, *Tagore, Poet against Totalitarianism*, p. 54. Vivek Bhattacharya (*Tagore—the Citizen of the World*, Metropolitan Book Company, 1961) has tried to show that all his life he was a poet of the people (pp. 61–68).

29 Quoted from Hiren Mukerjee, *Himself a True Poem*, p. 63.

of your ancestors, brag that the whole world trembles
with dread of the Aryan might and pride!

And he adds,

Rather than this, O that I might be an Arab Bedowin! [30]

who, at least, is free, courageous and adventurous.

Many of his patriotic songs were composed in response to requests from national leaders and organisations. The songs composed during the days of the Swadeshi agitation and the partition of Bengal fired the imagination of millions of his countrymen. They glorify the cultural heritage of the motherland and instil pride and confidence in the hearts of his countrymen. Of the songs of this period the best known is "Ekla Chalo Rey" (Go thou forth Alone), written in 1905. It was deservedly a a favourite of Mahatma Gandhi. Here is a part of the song, as translated by Edward Thompson:

If they answer not thy call, walk alone,
If they are afraid and cower mutely facing the wall,
O thou of evil luck,
Open thy mind and speak out alone.
If they turn away and desert you when crossing
the wilderness,
O thou of evil luck, trample the thorns under thy tread
And along the blood-lined track travel alone.

Another song which became "a household mantra" in Bengal during the days of the Swadeshi movement is "Banglar Mati Banglar jal" in which he prays :

Let the earth and the water, the air and the fruits
of my country be sweet, God,

and in rapture over his beloved country, he sings :

Blessed am I that I am born to this land and that I
had the luck to love her.

Of course, the most famous of his patriotic songs is the one that has been adopted as our national anthem, "Jana Gana Mana."

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30 Translation by Edward Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore, Poet and Dramatist*, pp. 76–77.

It was composed, tuned and sung by him in March 1912 at his Jorosanko house in the presence of Mahatma Gandhi, Lokamanya Tilak, Lala Lajpatrai, Pandit Madan Mohan Malavya and other eminent sons of India who had assembled to witness the performance of his play *Valmiki Pratibha.*

There are many poems of Tagore which give us an idea of what he wanted his dear country to be like. Of these mention may be made of the famous "Where the mind is without fear" (*Gitanjali*, No. 35) and "Thou hast given us to live" which was sung at the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress in 1917, and "Freedom from fear."[31]

Let me refer to one more of his Indian poems, the poem entitled "Prasna" (Question) in Bengali and translated as "This Evil Day" in *The Fugitive and Other Poems.*[32] It belongs to the year 1931 when India was in a ferment. The communal riots, the satyagraha movement launched by Gandhiji, its ruthless suppression by the British and the imprisonment of Gandhiji on his return to India after the unsuccessful Round Table Conference filled the poet's soul with anguish. For once he almost lost his mental poise and he poured out the agony of his heart in this poem :

> Age after age, hast Thou, O Lord, sent Thy messengers into this pitiless world, who have left their word : "Forgive all. Love all. Cleanse your hearts from the blood-red stains of hatred."
>
> Adorable are they, even to be remembered; yet from the outer door have I turned them away today—this evil day—with unmeaning salutation.
>
> Have I not seen secret malignance strike down the helpless under the cover of hypocritical night ?
>
> Have I not heard the silent voice of Justice weeping in solitude at night's defiant outrages ?

---

31 *Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore* (Macmillan, 1962), p. 454.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 450.

Have I not seen in what agony reckless youth, running mad, has vainly shattered its life against insensitive rocks?

Choked is my voice, mute are my songs today, and darkly my world lies imprisoned in a dismal dream; and I ask Thee, O Lord, in tears :

" Hast Thou Thyself forgiven, hast even Thou loved those who are poisoning Thy air, and blotting out Thy light ? "

9. Tagore's internationalism and his response to world affairs

But Tagore, as is well known, was no narrow nationalist. His speech on nationalism to the Japanese people boldly emphasized the dangers of this creed which had begun to fascinate them. His travels all the world over and his establishment of Viswabharati "where all the world becomes a single nest,"[33] the first and only university of its kind in the world, are practical demonstrations of his cosmopolitan outlook. This outlook and his sensitive response to all the major events in all parts of the world are very well illustrated in his poetry.

Critics of Tagore have drawn attention to the poet's growing awareness of international developments and the consequent change in his poetry from what has disparagingly been called "woolly mysticism" to realism. It is easy to explain this change. Unlike natural rivers, the stream of the poet's life flowed placidly in the early half, the rapids and the turbulent currents disturbed its flow in the second half. His sudden rocketing into international reputation consequent on the award of the Nobel Prize, his world travels and, above all, the cataclysmic events that shook the world and threatened to destroy civilization itself naturally influenced the sensitive poet and evoked sympathetic response in his literary work. The early life of the poet was lived during the spacious days of Victorian serenity, in pastoral peace in the cultured milieu of his ancestral home or in Shailada on the Padma, "the undivided Ganges before it joins the Brahmaputra

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33 Quotation from the Vedic hymn chanted at the inauguration.

and breaks into a thousand mighty waterways."[34] The latter years of the poet's life, on the other hand, saw the catastrophic events that sent countries and empires crashing. No wonder a poet who is most susceptible to every influence could not remain static, though the essential values that he preached are the same throughout his life.

> I am the world's poet, and all its sounds
> Must have response from my lute,

so sang the poet at the age of eighty in one of his last and greatest poems. The claim that he makes is readily conceded, for

> Nothing that appertained to the world was alien to him, and the world's woes found him, not with his back bent and his spirit in a mist, but with his head high and his eyes on fire, the holy anger of the sages of ancient India who had been his kin.[35]

As early as 1901 Tagore began speaking about the evils of nationalism in the poems of *Naivedya.* A definitely international outlook was developed as his attention was drawn to the cruelties perpetrated by the British imperialists in South Africa and to the outbreak of the Boer War. In poems 64, 65 and 66 he deals with these themes—hatred and injustice to fellow human beings under the guise of nationalism, the evils of nationalism and the decline and the eventual destruction of Western civilization.

The collection of poems called *Balaka* (A Flight of Swans) written during the years 1914–1916 after the award of the Nobel Prize (1913) and his European tour, contains many poems that are the outcome of the impact of World War I on the poet's mind. Poem No. 2, beginning, "Now the All-Destroying is come" "reads like a prophecy of the First World War that was so shortly to break out."[36] Poem No. 5, "On this dark night my boatman has gone crossing the world seas," and Poem No. 37, "Do you hear the tumult of death afar" have also been interpreted

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34 Edward Thompson, *Tagore as Poet and Dramatist*, p. 96.

35 Hiren Mukerjee, *Himself a True Poem*, p. 46.

36 Aurobindo Bose, *A Flight of Swans*, English translation of Poems from *Balaka* (John Murray, 1955), p. 5.

as referring to the war, the havoc and destruction caused by it, and the faith in a glorious future for mankind.

The poems of the period between the two world wars, the period of of the utter failure of the Peace, show Tagore's clear insight into the shifting scenes of the world stage. He raised his voice against cruelty, violence, injustice, tyranny and oppression wherever he found them. The poet's indignation was roused by the fascist rapes committed on China, Abyssinia, Spain and Czechoslovakia. The stock–piling of armaments by European countries roused him to towering rage. In "The Son of Man," [37] one of his most famous poems, he describes what Christ finds on revisiting the world of man to save whom he died on the cross, the most destructive weapons "hissing and raining sparks as they are sharpened on monster wheels." But what pains him most is that on these lethal weapons are engraved his own name and texts of his own words. The poem concludes :

> He presses His hand upon His heart; He feels that the age-long moment of His death has not ended, that new nails, turned out in countless numbers by those who are learned in cunning craftsmanship, pierce Him in every joint.
>
> They had hurt Him once, standing at the shadow of their temple: they are born anew in crowds.
>
> From before their sacred altar they shout to the soldiers, "Strike !"
>
> And the Son of Man in agony cries, "My God, my God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me ?"

A companion poem to "The Son of Man" is "Boro–Bodur"[38] based upon the poet's visit to the famous Buddhist shrine in Java, with its refrain, "Let Buddha be my refuge." The Buddha signifies "the central calm in the midst of whirring flights of bloodthirsty ages."[39] Poems 17 and 18 in *Prantik* (1937) are

37 *Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 453.
38 *Ibid.*, p. 451.
39 Rajendra Verma, *Rabindranath Tagore, Prophet against Totalitarianism*, p. 46.

a vehement onslaught on fascism, the monster that had successfully reared its ugly head in many parts of the world. Tagore presents the situation thus :

> On its one side a defiant savagery
> And the growl of homicidal drunkenness,
> On the other, timid powers tied to the load
> Of their carefully guarded hoardings,
> Meekly settling down to silent safety
> Of acquiescence
> After miscalculated bursts of
> Impatience.

The poet, with a bitterness and rage unusual of him, pronounces a tremendous curse :

> Give me power, O awful judge,
> Sitting on the throne of Eternity
> That I may hurl imprecation
> Upon this cannibal whose gruesome hunger
> Spares neither women nor children,
> That my words of reproach may ever rock
> Upon the heart–throb of history humiliated by itself,
> Till this choked and chained age
> Finds its bed of rest on its ashes.[40]

Tagore's criticism of the Munich Pact is contained in a poem which he sent to Prof. V. Lesny in Czechoslovakia.

A poem on Africa in 1937 expresses the idea that the dark continent was snatched away by an impatient wave from the bosom of the East, thereby prophetically suggesting the close solidarity between the Asian and African countries. He also refers to the attack on Abyssinia by Italy—how "another continent drunk with the heady wine of conquests, steals on dark Africa with man–traps."

In the poems of the last years we hear the rumblings of the coming war and its terrific arrival with all the horrors of devastation and death. They are also tinged with thoughts of the poet's

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40 *Prantik*, 17. *Poems* (Viswabharati, 2nd edn.), p. 171.

approaching end which he awaited with patience and cool unconcern. A typical poem is "Janmadin" (Birthday) written on his birthday in 1938. He is holding Death's passport in hand, ready to start his crossing to the unrevealed shore, but he has no sorrow, indeed he is grateful for the gifts of life which he has fully enjoyed. But the note of peace and calm is suddenly broken by a vehement outburst against the tyrants and oppressors of humanity:

> The gluttons who lust for flesh, the traffickers in festering carrion, have banded today in their orgies of violence, day and night,
>
> Yet mockery tempts my smile, as of old, at the pompous folly of the learned, at the tyranny of the beggarly rich, at the hideous make-up of the showy, at the blasphemy that lampoons the divine in Man. [41]

10. His optimism—faith and hope in man and the final outcome

"The divine in Man"—that is what Tagore never forgot. Even in the midst of the gloom and darkness caused by the orgy of violence and hatred and destruction let loose in the worst demonstration of human Yahooism—the second world war—Tagore didn't lose sight of the divine in man. "I have great faith in humanity," he said in a lecture at Milan, "Like the sun it can be clouded, but never extinguished." [42] In a poem written on the 24th of January 1941, a few months before his death, the poet mourns the unabashed manifestation of primitive barbarism by the "civilized" nations of the world, but he concludes the poem on a note of hope and cheer, that a new civilization will rise from the ashes of the old and the roar of the cannon today is the announcement of a new era. For while it grieved the poet's heart to think what man has made of man, he was sure that man had it in him to build a brave new world.

This indeed is the note on which he concludes all the poems denouncing the hatred and violence embittering the world. Like every great poet he ends his poems in "calm of mind, all passion spent." For Tagore's faith in the goodness of man and the ultimate triumph of the forces of Truth and Peace was

41 *Poems*, 2nd edition, No. 100, p. 179.

42 "The Voice of Humanity" in *Lectures and Addresses by Rabindranath Tagore*, selected by A. X. Soares (Macmillan, 1955).

unshakeable. This faith finds repeated expression in his work, especially in the poems of *Balaka* and all the succeeding poems. He believed in the progress of humanity in spite of temporary setbacks caused by wars and revolutions. His last years were years of utter disillusionment. But the final word is not one of gloom or despair. Upon the ashes of the moribund civilization will arise a new social order based on love and truth so that the triumphant march of humanity will continue, braving death and destruction. The poet who could write a few months before his death,

> Sweet is the world, sweet the dust of it,

and

> Truth's loveliness has taken form in earth's dust,[43]

is certainly not a pessimist or cynic. Even after he "hurls his imprecation" on the cannibal whose gruesome hunger spares neither women nor children"[44] he proceeds in the next poem to give us a strange "*santivachan*," "a cry and a call more than a message" :[45]

> The serpents are hissing their poisoned breath all round,
> the gracious message of peace will sound like
> futile mockery,—
> Before, however, I leave
> I send out my call
> to all who are getting ready, day and night for the
> fight with the demons that destroy.

Let me conclude this lecture with another *shantivachan* of Tagore. In his great address on his eightieth birthday he said :

> As I look round I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility. And yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man. I would rather look forward to the opening of a new chapter in his history after the cataclysm is over and the atmosphere rendered clean with the spirit of service and sacrifice.... A day will come when unvanquished Man will retrace his path of conquest, despite all barriers, to win back his lost human heritage.

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43 The first poem of *Arogya*.

44 *Prantik*, 17 (already quoted).

45 Sisir Kumar Ghose, *The Later Poems of Tagore* (Asia Publishing House, 1961), p. 97. The translation of the lines is also by Ghose.

II

TAGORE AND THE DRAMA OF IDEAS

1. Tagore's plays a new kind of drama written for a select audience.

2. *The Sanyasi*.

3. *Sacrifice*.

4. *The King of the Dark Chamber*.

5. *The Post Office*.

6. *Mukta–dhara*.

7. *Red Oleanders*.

8. The Ideas.

9. The various ways in which the ideas are expressed and how far he has succeeded.

1. Tagore's plays a new kind of drama written for a select audience

Dr. Johnson's famous dictum, "The drama's laws the drama's patrons give," is not applicable to the plays of Tagore for the simple reason that (to adapt the second line of Johnson's couplet) though he lived to write he did not write to live. He wrote because his opulent and many-splendoured creative genius could not but express itself in such diverse forms as poetry, drama, fiction and the essay. He was under no necessity to adapt his own creative talent to pander to the tastes of an audience. In fact his own concept of drama and its production on the stage, and the audience for whom his drama was intended show that far from following any beaten track he wanted to create a new kind of drama and produce it on the stage under conditions different from those tried before.

"Drama," wrote Tagore, "has the responsibility of drawing apart the curtain of nationalism and reveals the inner reality of things." He believed that the use of too many realistic sets and painted scenes was "an intrusion" that would divert the attention from "the inner reality of things." To achieve his purpose he thought of starting a theatre "not for the masses, but for those who want to taste the deliberate pleasures of a fine art."[1]

It is therefore not surprising that except towards the fag end of his life no play of Tagore was acted on the professional stage. The improvised theatre in his own Jorosanko home and the open air theatre at Santiniketan were the places at which many of his plays were performed. The actors were Tagore himself—and from all accounts he was a great master of the histrionic art—the members of his family and the families of his friends, and the boys and girls at Santiniketan. He himself directed and produced his plays, usually with the barest theatrical accessories. The audience consisted of people of culture and refinement to whom alone most of his plays would appeal.

Tagore's fecundity was as remarkable in the field of the drama as it was in the fields of poetry and fiction. He wrote more than thirty plays. They include serious plays expressing lofty ideas

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1 *Natya*, Theatre Arts Journal, Tagore Issue, "Tagore on Theatre," New Delhi, 1961, pp. 6–9.

and ideals directly and indirectly (by means of symbols and allegories), tragedies, operas, dance dramas, comedies in prose and short plays or " snapshots of dramas " (as one of his friends called them). Some of them have not yet been translated into English. It is therefore not possible to deal with all of them in a lecture of this kind. My object is to discuss a few representative plays which aim definitely at setting forth an idea, and to consider how far Tagore has succeeded in reconciling the claims of art and of ideas in them.

2. *The Sanyasi*

One play of his which answers fully to the description of "drama of ideas" is *The Sanyasi* (called in Bengali *Nature's Revenge*). It was written when Tagore was twenty-two. Despite its early date (1882), it is one of the most important of his plays, because it is very clearly a dramatization of his favourite idea—an idea that was fundamental to his philosophy of life, and to which he clung tenaciously all his long life—that the infinite should be achieved through the finite, that divinity could be realised only through life in this world. Tagore himself explains that he wrote the play to illustrate the truth that " by accepting this world, by trusting this human society, by respecting all that is tangible, we can truly apprehend the Infinite." [2] The value he attached to this early work is clear also from what he says about it in *Reminiscences* :

> *Nature's Revenge* may be looked upon as an introduction to the whole of my future literary work ; or, rather, this has been the subject on which all my writings have dwelt—the joy of attaining the Infinite within the finite. [3]

This idea is very clearly embodied in the action of the drama. We see the Sanyasi sitting outside his cave, boasting that he is now completely " free of fear and desires," [4] and that he can now go out into the world sure of his victory over the forces of nature. The procession of men and women with whom the world is too

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2 Sujit Mukerjee, *Passage to America* (Bookland, Calcutta, 1964), p. 151.

3 p. 238.

4 *Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 464.

much pass before him, but he is fully detached. Then Vasanti, the daughter of the outcaste Raghu, meets him and seeks his protection. His initial indifference is gradually changed to sympathy, and sympathy to a softer emotion. The man who had boasted, "I am a Sanyasi, I have cut all my knots, I am free,"[5] breaks his staff and his alms-bowl, as he realizes that the "finite is the true infinite."[6] But Nature's revenge is not yet complete. He goes out in search of the girl. But he comes to learn that she is dead. This is necessary to complete his understanding of life—that death and sorrow are as much a part of life as love and joy.

In this play Tagore has successfully brought out the idea which it seeks to illustrate. At the same time the play is a real play and not an arid presentation of an abstract idea. Its success on the stage is clear proof of this. The inner meaning and the symbols employed are easy to understand. That the cave represents the complete isolation of the Sanyasi from the world, that the breaking of his bowl and staff signifies his renunciation of asceticism, are transparently clear. The speeches and the actions of the chief protagonist are quite in character and give us no shock of incredibility. The interest of the Bengali version of the play is enhanced by the numerous songs describing the beauty of nature and the joy of life. Altogether *Sanyasi* can ne considered as a successful play of ideas.

3. *Sacrifice*

Another early play most effective both as stage drama and as a play of ideas is *Sacrifice*. "The question that runs through it is, Which is better, convention and worldly power, or love and compassion for all wordly things?"[7] Although the immediate theme of the play is the sacrifice of animals to the Goddess Kali, it is quite clear that the play has a wider significance as Tagore dedicates the work to "those heroes who bravely stood for peace when human sacrifice was claimed for the goddess of war."[8] The larger theme is the conflict between orthodoxy

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5 *Ibid.*, p. 472.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 478.

7 G. D. Khanolkar, *The Lute and the Plough*, A Life of Rabindranath Tagore, translated by Thomas Gay (The Book Centre, Bombay, 1963), p. 87.

8 *Collected Poems and Plays*, p. 502.

and convention on one side and the claims of humanity on the other.

The conflict in the play begins when, moved by the prayers of the beggar girl Aparna, King Govinda forbids the sacrifice of animals before the image of the Goddess. Raghupati, the priest of the Kali temple, refuses to obey the order. Firmly convinced that the death of the king is the only way of ensuring the continuance of the age-old practice in which he firmly believes, he plots to bring about his end. He has a foster-son, Jaising, who is the centre of all his affection and solicitude. Jaising undertakes to bring about the king's death. When Jaising, torn between blind faith in his preceptor Raghupati and the dictates of his own reason and conscience, ends the agony of his heart by suicide, Raghupati is disillusioned and he breaks the idol of his goddess. He, however, responds to the call of Aparna who had loved Jaising, and goes away with her saying, "Come, child, come, Mother, I have found thee. Thou art the last gift of Jaising." [9]

Here, again, the central idea of the play is brought out by a plausible story and convincing characters. There is a proper correlation between the incidents and the characters. The course of events is decided by the nature of the human agents. The suicide of Jaising is the inevitable outcome of his mental anguish which reaches a stage of unendurability. Equally inevitable is the final transformation of Raghupati. Edward Thompson, however, thinks that this is too sudden and unreasonable.[10] Such a view fails to take into account the softer side of Raghupati's nature which has been adequately portrayed earlier in the play. This deep and tender attachment to Jaising and his solicitude for his safety are touchingly portrayed:

> But, my boy, I have reared you from your childhood, and you have grown close to my heart. I can never bear to lose you, by any chance.[11]

The loss of a boy so dear to him brings about a revulsion of feeling. If this is the reward that he gets from the goddess

9 *Collected Poems and Plays*, p. 532.
10 *Rabindranath Tagore, Poet and Dramatist*, p. 94.
11 *Collected Poems and Plays*, p. 518.

whom he has served and worshipped with a devotion that makes him indifferent to the wrath of his king and his own safety, then certainly that goddess is not worthy of his worship. His despair and disillusionment are inevitable, and so too the transformation that makes him destroy the image in which he has no iota of faith left. When Aparna who is his link with Jaising calls him father' he is touched. He realizes that " love is greater than hatred and humanity is greater than age-old conventions." [12] Thus *Sacrifice*, too, is successful as a play and as a play of ideas.

Malini is another well-known play of Tagore. But as there is considerable similarity between the central theme and characters of this play and those of *Sacrifice*, it is, perhaps, not necessary to deal with it at length here.

4. *The King of the Dark Chamber*

We now pass on to the *Gitanjali* period, the early years of the present century. The two most important plays of ideas of this period are *The King of the Dark Chamber* and *Post Office* (the Bengali names of the plays being *Raja*, published in 1910, and *Dak Gher* written in 1917). *The King of the Dark Chamber* is a highly symbolical play and hence its meaning is not clear like that of the earlier plays we have discussed. The reader who does not understand the inner meaning of the play will find it quite meaningless. But if we accept the play as an allegorized represention of the Vaishnava philosophy of the relationship between God and the human soul, then the play begins to make consistent sense. Tagore's denial of any allegorical significance in the play is altogether unacceptable. In a letter to C. F. Andrews he wrote :

> Critics and detectives are naturally suspicious. They scent allegories and bombs where there are no such abominations. It is difficult to convince them of our innocence.[13]

That the characters and the story are allegorical is clearly shown even at the outset. The King never shows himself although

12 *Rabindranath Tagore, His Mind and Art*, p. 118.

13 Sujit Mukherjee, *Passage to America*, p. 150.

he is everywhere. " Why, the whole country is all filled and crammed with the King," says the grandfather to the second citizen.[14] The invisible King therefore stands clearly for God. The Queen, Sudarshana, stands for the soul. The King and the Queen are husband and wife, and yet she has never seen him. The Dark Chamber stands for the heart, or perhaps, the inner consciousness, where alone the King and the Queen meet. Thus, on the surface level, the play yields no meaning, but it becomes quite intelligible as an allegory of the human soul seeking union with God. Though the Queen has not seen the King, her maid, Surangama, who stands for intuition, says that she has seen him. She explains that she is a mere servant and so no difficulty baulks her. This means that Intuition gets the first knowledge of God (the King) and that it communicates that knowledge to the soul (the Queen). Thus the drama begins and proceeds in the allegorical–intellectual plane. But as we come to the later scenes Tagore tries to bring the play to the level of real life and emotion. The Queen yearns to see the King, but is attracted to the Pretender (some false idea of God). Later she feels ashamed of her sin, and when she meets the King (scene viii) she asks him to punish her and then leaves him abruptly saying that if she stayed with him she would be constantly harassed by the sense of her infidelity. The whole scene is effective on the surface–natural level which however is not in harmony with the intellectual thesis of the play. The same discord is evident in the next scene where the Queen appears as a servant working in her father's house. She hears sweet music coming from a bush beneath her window. It reminds her of the divine strains that she used to hear when she was in her palace. This signifies that though the soul may fall a prey to worldly temptations for a time, God does not desert it, and it must ultimately come back to Him. This is exactly what Surangama tells the Queen. So in the final scene we see Queen Sudarshana, completely cured of her pride and false desire, surrendering herself to the King. Earlier she was full of fear for him and was repelled by his sight. But now she can look at him without fear and his sight is no longer repulsive. She tells him :

> Your Love lives in me—you are mirrored in that Love,
> and you see your face reflected in me : nothing of this

14 *The King of the Dark Chamber* (Macmillan, London), p. 14.

> is mine, it is all yours, O Lord.[15]

Now that she is united with him, i.e., the soul has been united with God, there is no need for him to remain unseen. So he tells her :

> I open the doors of this dark room today—the game is finished here ! Come, come with me, now, come outside—into the light.[16]

Tagore, as we have already seen, believes in the attainment of the Infinite through the finite. The Queen makes the mistake of seeing the King before she has realized the invisible aspect. When she has achieved the latter, it becomes easy to realize the visible aspect, and see him. The dark chamber is opened and the union is complete.[17]

The message that Tagore seeks to convey through *The King of the Dark Chamber* is that

> the fulness of spiritual life can be realized only when the life of contemplation is merged into the life of action—the life of service to humanity.[18]

But is the message conveyed in terms of dramatic art ? The answer could only be a " No." In the first place the play on the surface level is not only quite unintelligible, but absurd. Even admitting that in a pure allegory the meaning has to be sought at a deeper level, we cannot concede that Tagore keeps to this allegorical level consistently. When he mixes up naturalism and allegory, when he wants us to respond intellectually and emotionally at the same time, when the God–Soul relationship and the wife–husband–lover relationship are mixed up, the result is confusion and chaos. This is what has happened to *The King of the Dark Chamber*, or, at least, to some parts of it.

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15 p. 139.

16 p. 139.

17 In this interpretation I have followed *Rabindranath Tagore, His Mind and Art* (pp. 125–131) and S. K. Desai's essay " Symbolism in Tagore's Plays " in *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English* (Karnataka University, Dharwar, 1968), pp. 89–91.

18 *Rabindranath Tagore, His Mind and Art*, p. 131.

5. *The Post Office*

This charge certainly cannot be made against *The Post Office* which was written shortly after *The King of the Dark Chamber*. Next to *Gitanjali*, *The Post Office* is the best known work of Tagore in India and abroad, and deservedly so. For the appeal which it makes to every kind of reader is unfailing and stirring. It portrays an orphan boy Amal, who has been adopted by a distant relative, Madhab. He is ill and his foster-father who is deeply attached to him and anxious to save his life, calls in the village physician. The physician wants the child to be confined to a small room without being exposed to the autumn wind and rain. Amal is a very imaginative child. He is loving, observant, full of curiosity, and eager for adventure. Confined now to his small room, he looks at the world outside through a window, he is fascinated by the stream of life that he watches, and he draws towards him a number of passers-by like the little flower-girl, the dairyman, the watchman, the village headman and Gaffer dressed as a fakir. He imagines that the postman of the Post Office near his window will one day bring him a letter from the King. The King sends his physician to attend on him and to announce that the King himself will come to see him. Even as they are talking, the child sinks into eternal sleep.

Almost throughout, the play moves on the level of normal life, and we can be deeply moved by it as the simple story of a sweet little child, afflicted with a fatal illness and gradually declining and dying. The pathos of the story is enhanced by the fact that even as he is drawing to his inevitable end, he is engrossed by the joy and the glory of life and is full of plans for his future.

But is the play to be taken just at its face value ? Are there not unmistakable signs that more is meant than meets the eye and the ear ? The suggestions that the play was an allegory were denied by the poet who said that it was " very concrete," and that it was a truthful evocation of his own lonely and yearning childhood. But in his letter to C. F. Andrews he gave this interpretation of the play :

> Amal represents the man whose soul has received the call of the open road....At last the closed gate is opened by the King's own physician, and that

> which is " death " to the world of hoarded wealth and certified creeds brings him awakening in the world of spiritual freedom.[19]

Hunters of allegories and symbols have discovered an interminable variety of inner meanings in the play. K.S.R. Sastri gives an elaborate interpretation of the play, investing every detail with a profound symbolical significance.[20] To take the play as such a complete and consistent allegory is to miss its human and emotional appeal.

One of the simplest suggestions on the subject is that the play is an expression of the irrepressible longing felt by the poet in 1911 to shake himself free of the chains of family, and wander at will through the wide world. He sought relief from this restlessness by writing *The Post Office* in four days :

> The lad Amal is the boy Tagore, and the play expresses that mysterious call that came to him and the emotions it awakened. The restless poet is athirst to wander far away ; he sits by the window as the day departs, waiting till it shall return. The dominant theme of *The Post Office* is the longing for the far horizons.[21]

A letter written to a friend about this time, quoted by Khanolkar, expresses this wanderlust of the poet.

The play, however, cannot be accepted at its face value, though reading it with no pre-conceived notions of allegorical significance is quite rewarding. That it has a deeper meaning or meanings is clear from many passages and especially the closing scene. But the inner meaning should be felt rather than known, it should be sensed emotionally rather than apprehended intellectually. To be dogmatic about any particular interpretation is to be unjust to the play and miss its rich suggestiveness ; to seek consciously for underlying meanings or to attempt to build a consistent theory about its true significance is to fail to appreciate its elusive beauty. Here, as elsewhere, we murder to dissect.

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19 *Letters to a Friend.*

20 *Rabindranath Tagore* (Ganesh & Co., Madras, 1916) pp. 333–334.

21 G. D. Khanolkar, *The Lute and the Plough* pp. 160–162.

To the seekers of a specific inner significance one might say what Walter de la Mare told an inquisitive Cambridge undergraduate who wanted to know the meaning of the poem " The Listeners : "

> Whatever " meaning " you are so good as to find in it, will more than content me.

Let us leave every reader to find or feel whatever meaning he can in *The Post Office*.

Its true significance apart, the play is one of the finest things of its kind in any literature. The most enthusiastic encomiums have been showered on it by the critics of Tagore. It is a delicate little masterpiece. Yeats in his Preface to it said that it is " perfectly constructed and conveys to the right audience an emotion of gentleness and peace." Thompson who thinks that the play has been greatly overrated is, however, full of praise for the portrayal of Amal :

> It does successfully what both Shakespeare and Kalidas failed to do, brings on to the stage a child who neither " shows off " nore is silly.[22]

He also praises Tagore for the perfect language which keeps the play from sliding into a " hopeless mush and welter of sentimentalism."[23] All told it is a " gem of beautiful writing."

6. *Mukta–dhara*

We now come to the last or the post-Gitanjali period. The most important play of this period is *Mukta-dhara* (The Free Current), written in 1922. This is considered by many, including Edward Thompson, as the greatest of his plays. It is the story of two kingdoms, Uttarakut, and its subject state, Shiv-tarai. Shiv-tarai depends for its water on the falls of the mountain stream of Mukta-dhara. Abhijit, the crown prince of Uttarakut, who is the viceroy or governor of Shiv-tarai, throws open the roads for trade and excuses the people from paying their

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22 *Rabindranath Tagore, Poet and Dramatist* p. 215.

23 *Ibid.* p. 213.

24 Hiren Mukerjee, *Himself a True Poem* p. 73.

taxes till better times. This enrages the imperialists of Uttarakut. In revenge, and in order to enforce the subjection of Shiv-tarai more effectively, the King of Uttarakut orders a dam to be built across Mukta-dhara to deprive Shiv-tarai of its only source of water. This difficult task is achieved by the King's engineer Bhairav by employing conscripted labour and after great loss of life. The action of the play takes place on the day on which Uttarakut is celebrating this achievement. The scene of action throughout is the open road along which the King and the Crown Prince, the Schoolmaster and his pupils, Dhananjaya, the musician-saint of Shiv-tarai, and a large number of people are constantly passing to and fro.

The erection of the dam and the threatened starvation of the people of Shiv-tarai make Abhijit unhappy. He decides to liberate the imprisoned current and save the starving people of Shiv-tarai. This he does by breaking open the dam at a place which he has come to know has been weakly built. The liberated current, as it rushes down turbulently, carries with it the body of its foster child Abhijit.

Even this bald summary of this exciting play will show that Tagore has directly or inditectly touched upon all the major political and economic problems posed by colonialism and the mechanical age in which it was written. When Tagore wrote the play, the first world war was ended, the Russian revolution had freed the country of its age-long tyranny and India had begun her struggle for liberation from British imperialism. The problems that faced the world then are reflected in the play.

On the spiritual level, there is the problem of psychological freedom. Abhijit is the champion of freedom and of the oppressed people. His love of freedom has its objective counterpart in the fate of Mukta–dhara whose waters are imprisoned by the dam. His discovery that he was a foundling picked up under the falls makes him believe that he has a spiritual affinity with this waterfall. His desperate action in breaking the dam and saving the people of Shiv-tarai frees both himself and the stream. "And in her freedom he has found his own."[25]

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25 Rabindranath Tagore, *Three Plays* translated by Marjorie Sykes (O.U.P., 1951), p. 71.

On the political level, the way the King and the people of Uttarakut try to terrorise and enforce the subjection of Shiv-tarai is clearly a satire on British imperialism in India and all colonialism and fascism in general. Dhanajaya—he first appeared in *Prayaschitta* (Atonement), 1909—who preaches non-violence[26] is the fictional counterpart of Mahatma Gandhi. The mockery of the schoolmaster who teaches nothing except the glory of his own country—that it is always right and that it always wins its wars—is clearly an indictment of narrow nationalism and the indoctrination going under the name of education in fascist countries.[27] The reference to " the high-ridged nose "[28] as a mark of racial superiority is almost a prophecy of the Nazi claim that Aryans were the salt of the earth. The monstrous Machine, the mighty engine tower on the dam, is a symbol of " machine-governments " and of the modern mechanical civilization which threatens to enslave all mankind.

The play is thus packed with meaning, it has several strands of thought woven into it. Few plays of ideas have so many thoughts and suggestions relating to such a diversity of problems discussed in them. As a work of art, it is a masterpiece. It is really to the great credit of the dramatist that he has been able to harmonise these manifold ideas into a compact play that compels the attention of the audience. The constant procession of people walking up and down, talking, singing, discussing, sustains the interest from beginning to end. And there is something awe-inspiring in the conclusion. Altogether it is one of the most successful dramas of ideas.

7. *Red Oleanders*

Problems similar to those dealt with in *Mukta-dhara* are presented in the next and the last play we shall consider, *Red Oleanders*, written in 1923. It describes the Yaksha town of which the King is hidden behind a network. Every one in the town is engaged in gold digging and hoarding. The town resembles a concentration camp. It has an army of slaves working like

26 *Ibid.* pp. 34–37.

27 *Ibid.* pp. 21–23.

28 *Ibid.* p. 22.

automatons, digging up gold. Like the workers in a big industrial factory they have no names or individuality, they are mere numbers. They have no joys in life and they drag on a drab, dreary existence. The Governor, the Gosai or the preacher, and the Professors are abettors of the soulless life in the Yaksha town.

To this disgusting place comes Nandini from the village. She is the spirit of youth and she represents love and joy and liberty. With her is Ranjan who assists her. They are in love with each other. Nandini wears a garland of red oleanders—a symbol of love and joy. She goes about radiating happiness all round. She seeks to enter the King's palace and argues with him from outside. The voice of the King is heard admitting that he is "parched...bare...and weary." In the conflict between the King and Nandini she finally gains victory though at the sacrifice of Ranjan. Nandini shakes the network and calls out the King. At last he makes his appearance, but not before he has killed Ranjan. The King is full of remorse and he feels that he is on Nandini's side.

In spite of much that is confusing and obscure in the play, it is clear that it presents a conflict between two distinct worlds, one containing all that Tagore hates and disapproves of, and the other containing all that he values and loves. S. K. Desai lists the two conflicting elements. On the one side there are

> pursuit of material wealth, over-organisation, nationalism, tyranny, conventional religion (used as opium), destructiveness, possessiveness, scholarship, artificial pleasures of the market place, and the consequences of all these—loss of freedom, loss of individuality, dehumanization, mutual suspicion, sorrow, boredom, weariness, a sense of emptiness, of homelessness, etc. Into the other world, which represents his positive values he puts: Nature, beauty, youth, love, joy, creative power, freedom, home, song, laughter, generosity, sympathy, pity, affection, desire to do good, to help others, to liberate, to emancipate, etc.[29]

29 "Symbolism in Tagore's Plays," in *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English* p. 93.

The people of the first world are the King, the Governor, the Professor, the Preacher, etc., while the main figures of the other world are Nandini and Ranjan.

On the intellectual level the play is satisfying, but on the human level not at all. The relationship between the King and Nandini is justifiable on the level of the symbolic meaning, but it is absurd on the realistic level. The symbolic meaning is, to quote Desai again :

> Matter needs Spirit to give it life, beauty, joy...
> and Spirit longs to lend life, beauty, etc., to Matter.[30]

But on the human level, when Nandini—a woman in love with and loved by Ranjan—shows admiration for the King and desires to go into his private chamber and coaxes him to go out with her, the impression produced is one of absurdity. So too the King burying his fingers in her unbounded hair and her liking it—all this on the realistic level tends to make Nandini's conduct open to the charge of impropriety, if not worse. Most of all, the conclusion is quite unsatisfactory—the King killing Ranjan, Nandini accepting the deed and saying that it was the beginning of the King's victory and that she expected Ranjan to come again, and then the King asking her to unite her hand with his (the King's) to kill him (the King) and emancipate him (the King). This is why the play, in spite of its clear philosophical significance, is so confusing, bewildering and obscure.

The six plays I have chosen for discussion are illustrative and not exhaustive. I shall now briefly examine (1) the nature of the ideas presented in these plays and (2) the methods that he has followed in presenting them and how far he has succeeded in reconciling the claims of thought and dramatic art in these plays.

8. The Ideas

First the quality of the ideas themselves. If the ideas discussed in a work of art are merely of local or contemporary significance, then the work will have no universal and eternal validity. That the infinite should be achieved through the finite, the central theme of *The Sanyasi*, is an idea that change of time

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30 *Ibid.* p. 94.

or place cannot affect. An equally important theme is illustrated in *The Sacrifice*, the conflict between orthodoxy and the claims of humanity. *The King of the Dark Chamber* deals with the relationship between God and the human soul while in *Mukta-dhara* and *Red Oleanders*, along with problems peculiar to the world of his own day are discussed some of the most perplexing problems of life. *The Post Office*, again, opens out vistas of thought in the sensitive and responsive reader's mind, which have interested and baffled philosophers of all times. Thus there is no danger of Tagore's dramas of ideas losing their freshness as creeds and fashions change. In them he has, no doubt, tried to lighten the burthen of the mystery, the heavy and the weary weight of all this unintelligible world.

9. The various ways in which the ideas are expressed and how far he has succeeded

Next, the manner in which Tagore has given expression to his ideas. Even the few plays we have examined reveal a variety of methods. In the plays of his early period, *The Sanyasi* and *Sacrifice*, Tagore has illustrated his ideas with directness and simplicity. Perhaps the extreme example of this method is found in the fables where a simple moral precept is illustrated by a simple story, which leaves hardly any room for doubt about its meaning or significance. In the case of a play the success of this method, however, demands that there should be a proper co-ordination between the characters and the incidents. In other words, the characters being what they are the story should be what it is and vice versa. We have already seen that the Sanyasi and Raghupathi are adequately drawn personages and that there is no inconsistency between what they are and what they do.

A far more successful play of ideas is *Mukta-dhara*. Here not one, but a multiplicity of problems of the world of his day and of all days are presented without obscurity or confusion. The symbols employed are easy to understand, and there is no clash within the play between the meanings at the surface and the inner levels. Take, for example, the conclusion of the play. The Crown Prince, solicitous of the welfare of the people of Shiv-tarai and to save them from starvation, destroys the dam and liberates the waters of *Mukta-dhara*, and in this desperate attempt he is carried away by the headlong torrent. The incident

at the realistic level is quite credible and in character. At the allegorical level, the significance is equally clear and convincing. Abhijit is the symbol of love of freedom and sympathy for the poor. Mukta-dhara is his objective counterpart, whose freedom is restrained by the dam. Again, the fact that he was picked up from below the dam establishes a kind of kinship between himself and the stream, and this affinity finds fulfilment when he is carried away by the current so that in the freedom of Mukta-dhara he finds his own. Thus there is perfect harmony between the two levels of meaning. Equally successful is Tagore's weaving of the numerous strands of significance into the harmonious texture of the play. Hence the supreme excellence of *Mukta-dhara* as a drama of ideas.

The same praise, however, cannot be bestowed upon his two most symbolic and allegorical plays, *The King of the Dark Chamber* and *Red Oleanders*. In an allegory or symbolical work, there are the explicit surface meaning and the implicit inner meaning. In a straightforward allegory like *The Pilgrim's Progress* the surface meaning and the underlying allegorical meaning run parallel to each other. In fact the work can be appreciated at both levels independently. Thus to a child it is the story of the adventures of a traveller while the grown-up man finds in it the description of the spiritual journey of the human soul from earth to heaven. But plays like *The King of the Dark Chamber* and *Red Oleanders* are unintelligible to the readers who seek only the surface meaning. But, as we have already seen, instead of caring only for the inner significance, Tagore makes these plays at times move on the surface or human level, and at other times on the inner symbolical level. The result is utter confusion, obscurity and even absurdity. To give but one illustration. In *Red Oleanders*, at the end, the King who had been defeated by Nandini tells her, " Be brave, Nandini, trust me. Make me your comrade today... to fight against me, but with your hand in mine. Let your hand unite with mine to kill me, utterly kill me. That will be my emancipation."[31] On the human level, this is absurd. A man usually takes the hand of a young, charming, vivacious, joy-radiating maiden (like Nandini) for a purpose very different from that of being killed. Not only does it make no sense, it is really

31 *Red Oleanders* (Macmillan, London, 1948), pp. 169–170.

nonsense. But on the allegorical level it makes good sense. The meaning is that materialism, realizing its own folly, seeks the aid of spiritualism to annihilate itself. Such clashes in the two levels lead to frequent obscurity and absurdity in *The King of the Dark Chamber* and *Red Oleanders*, which could not, therefore, be termed successful plays of ideas.

I have referred to one excellent type of allegory—that in which the two levels of meaning run parallel to each other without clashing. There is yet another type of allegory, allegory of a higher type. The method here is " to maintain fidelity to reality and so transform it into poetry that the naturalistic characters and action themselves become symbolic."[32] The supreme example of this type of allegory is Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. In this type, the surface meaning is complete, adequate and satisfying. All that the old man feels, says and does is what a man of his character and situated as he is would feel, say and do. And yet we realize that it is not just the story of an old man catching a fish. We sense something of deeper, more comprehensive, even of universal significance in the story. It is, perhaps, not possible for most readers to say precisely what this deeper significance is. Even the more perceptive readers who are able to offer cogent and consistent interpretations of the inner meaning do not agree on what it is. The suggestive and evocative power of the work is what makes it great. It is in this way that Tagore's *Post Office* is a great work. In fact, in my view, it is his greatest dramatic achievement.

To conclude, Tagore's claim to eminence as a playwright consists in the large number and versatility of his dramas, in their undisputed literary excellence, in their suitability for successful presentation on the stage and last, but not least, in the vision of a higher life that he presents in them. They provide a rich feast to the eye, ear, mind, heart and soul.

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32 S. K. Desai, " Symbolism in Tagore's Plays," *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English*, p. 88.

III

TAGORE THE STORY-TELLER

A. SHORT STORIES

1. Pathos in the stories.
2. Humour.
3. Insight into the psychology of children and adolescents.
4. Nature.
5. Supernatural element.

B. NOVELS

6. Both the short stories and the novels present a faithful picture of Bengali life.
7. *Binodini*.
8. *The Wreck*.
9. *Gora*.
10. *The Home and the World*.
11. *Farewell, My Friend*.
12. *Four Chapters*.
13. Tagore's place among the novelists.

In this lecture I shall deal first with the short stories and then with the novels of Tagore.

A. SHORT STORIES

1. Pathos in the stories

A Bengali critic[1] stated recently that Chekhov, Guy de Maupassant, Edgar Alan Poe and Rabindranath Tagore are the four greatest masters of the short story form in its classic period. With this verdict many western critics are not likely to agree. There is in Tagore's stories a vein of sentiment which is not quite to the taste of the European reader. Indians, generally, and, perhaps, Bengalis in particular, are an effusively sentimental people. Thompson's statement is fundamentally true, though it may be a little exaggerated :

> ....no Muse weeps on so little provocation as the Bengali Muse.... it is a nation that enjoys being thoroughly miserable.[2]

Tagore is regarded by Bengalis as the greatest poet of sorrow. The vein of sadness is quite different from cynicism or misanthropy of which there is no trace in him. It is as much in evidence in his short stories as in his poems. Tagore very often skates on the thin ice of pathos narrowly avoiding the fall into the abyss of sentiment. One might say that the characteristic note of some of his best stories is sadness or pathos.

" Mashi," for example, is one such story. It presents the tragic fate of Jotin who tries in vain to win the love and regard of his frivolous and heartless wife Mani. He falls seriously ill and his days are numbered. Even then Mani does not show any concern, and she goes to her father's house to attend a domestic celebration. Jotin's mashi (maternal aunt), one of Tagore's fine feminine embodiments of unselfishness, tries to build a heaven of falsehood for him by lying to him that Mani is full of love and solicitude for him, that she is making all the delicacies he likes,

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1 Narayan Gangopadhyaya, quoted with approval by Hiren Mukerjee, *Himself a True Poem*, p. 87.

2 Rabindranath Tagore, *Poet and Dramatist* p. 37.

that she has knitted a shawl for him. Mashi conceals from him the fact that Mani has gone to her house. But the fabric of lies is suddenly demolished by the servant who tells Jotin the truth. Jotin now realizes that Mani is a fraud and even when she does come to him, he would not care to see her.

Equally pathetic is the story of "Rashmani's Son." Kalipada is a poor boy, the only child of his parents. He is harassed and pestered by the rich boy Sailen and his friends. The persecution ends in Kalipada falling seriously ill. During the illness, searching the boy's box to find out who his parents are, Sailen discovers that Kalipada is his own uncle, for Sailen's grandfather and Kalipada's father were half brothers. Sailen now does his best to make amends for his earlier cruelties, but Kalipada ultimately dies. Sailen who has learned that his own grandfather had cheated Kalipada's father of his inheritance by stealing a will, secretly returns the will to Kalipada's father. But it is now too late. Kalipada's father is past caring for wealth and he destroys the will. The entire life of the boy is one of struggle and suffering and our hearts go out to him and his penurious parents.

Like Kalipada, Phatik, the hero of "Home-Coming," is one of the offspring of Tagore's tearful muse. From the frying pan of his own home where his mother treats him with cruelty, Phatik is thrown into the fire of his uncle's house in Calcutta. Here he is persecuted by his aunt who makes his life utterly miserable. He has an attack of malarial fever and he tries to run away. But he is brought back by the police. His condition grows worse and his mother is sent for. In his delirium he recognizes his mother for a moment before his eyes again wander. He dies with these words, "Mother, the holidays have come."[3] Thus poor Phatik's miseries in this world end and he returns to his eternal home.

But the poor dumb girl Subha's sufferings (in the story named after her) begin only towards the end of the story. This simple rustic girl lives a very happy life in her father's village home, with two cows as her understanding companions. But her parents who want to assure themselves of their caste in this world and of their safety in the next, decide to give her away in marriage.

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3 *Stories from Tagore* (Macmillan, 1945), p. 20.

She is taken to Calcutta and shown to a young man who, approving of her appearance and ignorant of her dumbness, agrees to marry her. After her marriage she is uprooted from her happy home and her congenial companions and taken to an unfamiliar place and unsympathetic people to live a life of "endless, voiceless weeping, which only the Searcher of Hearts could hear."[4]

2. Humour

These are but a few of the tragic stories in which pathos comes dangerously near sentimentality. Even those stories which are not tragic tend to bring the eternal note of sadness in. This is not to say that Tagore lacked a sense of humour and that all his stories are sombre. Far from it. From all accounts, he was a most convivial conversationalist and his efforts in the humorous vein are conspicuously successful. His play *Chirakumar Sabha* (The Bachelors' Club) is a scintillating skit that ripples with laughter. Although his greatest stories tell of saddest thought there are some in a lighter vein. The best example of this class is "The Parrot's Training" which pokes delicious fun at what Tagore calls "parrot-teaching." In some schools children are taught to learn by rote without any effort at making them think independently or learn from doing things. A parrot that lives a carefree life in the forest is caught and shut up in a golden cage. Its wings are cut and its feet chained, and it is stuffed with "copies of copies of copies of text books." At last it lies dead. When its body is shaken, only the paper stuffing rustles. The bird's education is successfully completed !

3. Insight into the psychology of children and adolescents

The stories reveal Tagore as having a remarkable insight into the psychology of children and adolscents. Their joys and sorrows, their hopes and disappointments, their successes and failures are portrayed with a masterly touch which makes them live in his pages.

Many are the unhappy children who come to a tragic end in his stories. The misery of these innocents is invariably the outcome of the uncongenial surroundings and atmosphere and the unfeeling people in whose midst they live. Phatik's sufferings

4 *Stories from Tagore* (Macmillan, 1945), p. 73.

and early death are the outcome of the harsh treatment that he receives first from his mother and his younger brother and later from his aunt. Venugopal in " Master Mashai " becomes frustrated because his rich father does not understand him and he stands in the way of his proceeding to England for higher education. His mother prevents his association with his high-minded tutor Haralal. All this has a stultifying effect on the youth who has recourse to theft to fulfil his desire to go abroad. Thus the boy brings about the ruin and death of Haralal, his best friend and well-wisher.

Subha's case has already been referred to. As long as she lives in her village home with the two cows Sarbhashi and Panguli as her intimate comrades, and in perfect harmony with her natural surroundings, she is happy. But her heartless parents give her away in marriage to one who doesn't know that she is dumb. She is transplanted in " a village in the west " among unsympathetic people. Here she is destined to spend the rest of her life in unrelieved misery.

Another girl doomed to unhappiness is Ratan in " The Post Master." This artless orphan girl of the village of Ulapur finds supreme happiness doing odd jobs for the Post Master and later in nursing him to life from a serious illness. But when the Post Master, at first entirely oblivious of, and later indifferent to, her feelings, leaves her behind on his transfer to Calcutta, she is plunged into inconsolable grief.

Somewhat similar is the case of Nilakanta of " The Castaway." This foundling is completely happy in the house of Kiran, but with the arrival of Kiran's brother Satish everything is changed. He becomes jealous of the newcomer and steals his German-silver inkstand. When he learns that the theft has been detected, he disappears from the place.

Among other masterly studies of childhood and adolescence in Tagore's short stories mention may be made of Mini of " Cabuliwallah," the happy child who blossoms into a happy bride under the understanding guardianship of her writer father ; Anukul's little son who comes to an early watery grave because he would not let any whim of his remain ungratified ; Kalipada (" Rashmani's Son "), the brief candle of whose life is snuffed out

by chill penury and the heartless harrassment of his schoolmaster ; and Kusum, the intelligent and loving granddaughter of Kailas Babu (" The Babus of Nayanjore ").

4. Nature

Another respect in which Tagore's short stories are remarkable is the abundant use he has made of the beauty and the luxuriance of rural Bengal. The stories are freely interspersed with exquisite descriptions of nature which forms a fitting background for the human drama that is enacted. But far more interesting than these descriptions are the presentations of nature as an active participant in this drama. Nature is, as it were, one of the *dramatis personae*. In this respect, as in other respects, " Subha " is one of the most interesting stories of Tagore.

Here there is complete harmony between nature and the chief protagonist. No Wordsworthian child of nature, growing in " sun and shower," whose whole being is moulded by nature's self, to whom nature is " both law and impulse," is more at one with its surroundings than is Subha. Her small village of Chandipur stood on the bank of a small river which had become an integral part of the lives of its inhabitants. It

> kept to its narrow bounds like a daughter of the middle class. This busy streak of water never overflowed its banks, but went about its duties as though it were a member of every family in the villages beside it. On either side were houses and banks shaded with trees. So stepping from her queenly throne the river goddess became a garden deity of each home, and forgetful of herself performed her task of endless benediction with swift and cheerful feet.[5]

Here the river, an object of nature, is compared to a middle class girl and portrayed as a member of every family and as the family deity. So, in other passages, Subha, a human girl, is compared in a series of comparisons, with objects of nature :

> ....black eyes need no translating ; the mind itself throws a shadow upon them. In them thought opens

5 *Stories from Tagore* (Macmillan, 1945), p. 67.

> or shuts, shines forth or goes out in darkness, hangs steadfast like the setting moon or like the swift and restless lightning illumines all quarters of the sky. Those who from birth have had no other speech than the trembling of their lips learn a language of the eyes, endless in expression, deep as the sea, clear as the heavens, wherein play dawn and sunset, light and shadow. The dumb have a lonely grandeur like Nature's own. Wherefore the other children almost dreaded Subha and never played with her. She was silent and companionless as the noontide.[6]

Again,

> She grew up, and little by little began to find herself. A new inexpressible consciousness like a tide from the central places of the sea, when the moon is full, swept through her.[7]

The complete identity between Subha and the world of nature around her is brought out in a number of passages. Every day, after her work was done, she stole to the waterside and sat there :

> But here Nature herself made up for her want of speech and spoke for her. The murmur of the brook, the voice of the village folk, the songs of the boatmen, the cry of the birds and the rustle of trees mingled and were one with the trembling of her heart. They became one vast wave of sound which beat upon her restless soul. This murmur movement of Nature was the dumb girl's language ; that speech of the dark eyes, which the long lashes shaded, was the language of the world about her. From the trees where the cicalas chirped, to the quiet stars, there was nothing but signs and gestures, weeping and sighing. And in the deep mid-noon.... when the great busy world paused in its toil and became suddenly a lonely, awful, giant, then beneath the vast impressive heavens there were only dumb Nature and a dumb girl, sitting very silent—one

6 *Stories from Tagore* (Macmillan, 1945), p. 67.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

> under the spreading sunlight, the other where a small tree cast its shadow.[8]

The identity between the girl and Nature is again emphasized in yet another passage :

> Later one night, when the moon was full, she slowly opened her door, and timidly peeped out. Nature, herself at full moon, like lonely Subha, was looking down on the sleeping earth. Subha's strong young life beat within her ; joy and sadness filled her being to its brim : she had felt unatterably lonely before, but her feeling of loneliness was this moment at its intensest. Her heart was heavy and she could not speak. At the skirts of this silent troubled Mother there stood a silent troubled girl.[9]

And, finally, when she learned that she was to leave her home,

> Subha left her room, and flung herself down on her grassy couch beside the river she loved so much. It was as if she threw her arms about the Earth, her strong, silent mother, and tried to say : "Do not let me leave you, mother. Put your arms about me, as I have put mine about you, and hold me fast."[10]

Another story in which nature and human nature meet, mingle and merge into each other is "The Post Master." The Post Master, uprooted from his urban home in Calcutta and posted to the remote village of Ulapur, found life desolate and dreary :

> His office and living-room were in a dark thatched shed, not far from a green, shiny pond, surrounded on all sides by a dense growth.[11]
>
> .... any poet who had attempted to catch the movement of the leaves in the dense bamboo thickets, would have felt a ghostly shiver run down his back.[12]

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8 *Stories from Tagore* (Macmillan, 1945), pp. 67–68.
9 *Ibid.*, pp. 70–71.
10 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
11 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
12 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

When the time for his return to Calcutta came, Ratan was all tears. She had hoped that after the days and weeks of his close companionship with her, he would take her away with him. But the idea never struck him till he had got into the boat.

> When he got in and the boat was under way, and the swollen river, like a stream of tears welling up from the earth, swirled and sobbed at her bows, then he felt grieved at heart ; the sorrow-stricken face of a village girl seemed to represent for him the great unspoken pervading grief of Mother Earth herself.[13]

But this identification of the girl with nature is soon followed by nature turning hostile and consciously, as it were, preventing the Post Master from returning to the bank and taking the girl with him :

> At one moment he felt an impulse to go back and bring away with him that lonely waif, forsaken of the world. But the wind had just filled the sails, the boat had got well into the middle of the turbulent current, and already the village was left behind and its outlying burning-ground had come into sight.[14]

The image of the burning-ground aptly signifies the death of all Ratan's happiness.

The story entitled "The Supreme Night" presents a scene in which nature in one of her most awe-inspiring moods brings a man for a few moments to the side of the woman whom he loved. The story-teller could have married Surabala and lived happily, but he wished to become a Garibaldi, the liberator of his country. He, however, ended by becoming an Assistant Teacher in a village school while she married a government pleader. One night, after a devastating storm and torrential rains, there was a tidal wave which swallowed up the whole village. But the story-teller and Surabala found themselves alone on the top of a small bank. At this time of cataclysm when

> the stars had been blotted out of the sky ; all the lights of the earth had been darkened,[15]

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13 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
14 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
15 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

she stood alone by his side. That night of "terrible desolate gloom of Nature's death-convulsion"[16] was also the night of "the supreme glory of his humble existence."[17]

Nature is thus often represented in these stories as playing a prominent part in the lives of human beings. Nature may often be in harmony with man, her moods may reflect faithfully those of human beings, and she may be in sympathy with them in their sorrows and sufferings. But nature can also be at times cruel and callous to man. This mood of heartless indifference to human destiny is portrayed in "The Child's Return." When Raicharan waded into the river to pluck the pretty flowers for his little master,

> the baby saw the river rushing by, splashing and gurgling as it went.... He got down from the go-cart and toddled off towards the river.... The mischievous fairies of the river with their mysterious voices seemed to be inviting him to enter their playhouse.[18]

The result was, when Raicharan came back to the go-cart with the flowers, no scream of baby delight welcomed his return :

> Only the river ran on with its splashing, gurgling noise as before, as though it knew nothing at all, and had no time to attend to such a tiny human event as the death of a child.[19]

5. Supernatural element

While nature plays a prominent part in many stories, in some he introduces the element of the supernatural. But in all these stories we have what is called the natural supernatural rather than the supernatural natural. What appears to be supernatural can be explained in terms of the real. Thus in "The Skeleton" a young woman whose skeleton is used for teaching osteology appears before one of the students at night and tells her story. But this supernatural narrative can be explained as the hallucination of the boy whose active brain defies the chains of slumber. The same thing can be said of "The Hungry Stones." The collector's

16 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
17 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
18 *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.
19 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

imagination is excited by the solitude and darkness of the night, and the associations of the old palace built by the ancient Emperor whose amatory adventures were the talk of the place for centuries. It is not surprising that he should be the victim of an illusory experience similar to one of the stories he must have heard. "The Trust Property" and "The Fugitive Gold" are based upon superstitious beliefs, but have nothing supernatural about them.

B. NOVELS

6. Both the short stories and the novels present a faithful picture of Bengali life

In the short stories of Tagore we get a very vivid, faithful and sympathetic picture of ordinary people in the villages and towns of Bengal. In this respect the novels of Tagore resemble his short stories. Better than any social history they present to us the ways of life, the customs and manners of the people of his country in the last years of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth centuries.

7. *Binodini*

We get a searching study of the social scene in Bengal in his first mature novel called in Bengali *Chokher Bali* (1901-2), literally translated, *Eye Sore*, the title of the first English translation by S. N. Tagore. Since then it has been translated again into English by Krishna Kripalini under the name of the heroine, *Binodini* (1959). The novel is a product of the period of its creation and bears the unmistakable mark of the social conventions of that period. It also portrays the interaction of the principal characters. So stated the two things—the social conditions of the age and the conflict of characters—might seem to be independent of each other. But they are interdependent and inseparable.

Binodini is the story of four principal characters, Mahendra who belongs to a well-to-do upper class Hindu family in Calcutta, his wife Asha, his friend Bihari, and a young widow, Binodini, who casts a spell on both the men. Mahendra is the only son of his widowed mother Rajalakshmi. He has been pampered and spoiled by his fond and jealous mother. He marries Asha,

a pretty, sweet, fatuous, doll-like girl. The young couple are infatuated with each other and they live a life of idyllic love and happiness. Into this garden of Eden enters the serpent in the form of Binodini, an irresistibly attractive and witty widow. She belongs to a poor family and her father had spent his meagre fortune on her education. But her beauty and her accomplishments had no value in the marriage market and she had to be married off to a sickly nonentity who soon after left her a destitute widow. As a relation she gets a footing in Mahendra's household. Conscious of her beauty and her wit she tries to entice Mahendra. The spoiled darling of a foolish mother and even more foolish wife, he easily falls into the trap and offers to sacrifice everything and every one to marry her. But in the course of winning his love she realizes that he is a weakling and she rejects him. She falls in love with Mahendra's steady and steadfast friend, Bihari. Although he first refuses to accept her love, he is later won over and he wants to marry her. But Binodini realizes that Bihari would become a social outcaste if he married her and she has the strength to make the supreme self-sacrifice of turning down his offer.[20]

The social drama of this novel clearly carries the mark of its age. In a later age the story would certainly have had quite a different course and conclusion. The modern reader may regard the novel as a failure, but the failure is really the failure of Tagore and his characters to defy the social conventions of their age. For the rest *Binodini* has some fine characterisation. Tagore excels, especially, in the delineation of women, and of all the women characters of his creation

> Binodini is the most real, convincing and full-blooded. In her frustrations and sufferings is summed up the author's ironic acceptance of the orthodox Hindu society of the day.[21]

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20 B. B. Majumdar, *Heroines of Tagore* (Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1968), pp. 214–216, has discussed two versions of the conclusion of the novel, one ending with Binodini's altruistic rejection of Behari and the other continuing the story to bring about the reconciliation of all the characters and the retreat of Binodini to Benares with Annapurna.

21 K. R. Kripalani, Foreword to his English translation, *Binodini* (Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1959), p. vi.

Besides the vivacious widow, the doting and jealous mother, Rajalakshmi, the weak and self-centred Mahendra, the simple, foolish ineffectual angel Asha whom the bitter experiences of life turn into a practical woman, and the loyal, generous (if somewhat self-righteous) Bihari are competently sketched.

8. *The Wreck*

Edward Thompson calls this novel and the next, *The Wreck*, "incredibly bad."[22] This charge is certainly not true of *Binodini*. Perhaps *The Wreck* (1903–1905) deserves the censure. Its popularity is out of all proportion to its intrinsic excellence. The whole plot of the story belongs to the type that Aristotle would have called the improbable possible. The boats in which Ramesh and his bridal party are travelling are wrecked in a storm. The bridegroom finds himself cast on a sandbank and near him he sees a girl in a bridal sari. He mistakes her as his newly-wed wife and he takes her home. Sometime later, however, he realizes his mistake, but he conceals it from the girl, Kamala. It requires all his ingenuity to keep back the truth from her and others and also to prevent her from taking what she considers her rightful place as his wife. At last the true husband of Kamala Dr. Nalinaksha, is accidentally discovered. In the end Kamala and Nalinaksha are united.

The story is full of improbabilities. It takes three months for Ramesh to discover that Kamala is not his wife. But fortunately no mischief has been done. The reasons why Ramesh hides the truth from Kamala and Hemnalini who loves him are unconvincing. Whatever his reasons, he causes more pain to himself and to the two girls by this step than he would have had he told them the truth.

The reunion between Nalinaksha and Kamala is also needlessly put off. The unconscionable delay in bringing about the denouement has no excuse except that the novelist wanted his work to reach a pre-determined length. Ramesh's lack of courage which alone accounts for his dilatoriness brings untold suffering to all the principal characters. In the end poor Hemnalini who was on the verge of marriage first with Ramesh and then with Nalinaksha

22 *Rabindranath Tagore, Poet and Dramatist*, p. 194.

is condemned to what looks like life-long maidenhood. The novel has indeed been appropriately named. For *The Wreck* is not only the story of a wreck, but it is also the wreck of a story !

9. *Gora*

The most famous of his novels is *Gora* (1907–1909). It weaves together very felicitously two strands—the story of the romantic love of two pairs of lovers and the predicament in which Indian society found itself as a result of the impact of western ideas. The hero is Gourmohan Babu or Gora. He embodies the spirit of Hindu orthodoxy as well as the new national spirit of a resurgent India. He and his friend (and follower) Binoy happen to be introduced to a Brahmo Samaj family of which the head is Paresh Babu. Gora and Binoy are attracted to two attractive girls of the family, Sucharita and Lalitha respectively. Though the fascination is mutual in both couples, Gora is not prepared to admit that he is touched, because as an orthodox Brahmin he could not entertain an alliance with a Brahmo family. He would not also countenance his friend Binoy committing a similar breach of propriety. Even when Gora realizes, and acknowledges to himself, that he is deeply in love with Sucharita, he is not prepared to sacrifice his religious principles. The conflict looks incapable of being resolved, but luckily the problem gets solved by Gora's discovery that he is not really a Hindu but the child of Irish parents. They had been killed in the mutiny and the baby had fallen into the hands of a childless Brahmin couple who had brought him up as their own son.

This discovery effects a sudden revolution in his views and outlook. He is no longer the fanatical orthodox Hindu, intolerant of the slightest breath of religious reform, but a spiritually emancipated man free from the bondage of all religious dogmas. He tells Paresh Babu :

> Today I am free, Paresh Babu ! I need no longer fear being contaminated or becoming an outcaste....
>
> Today I am really an Indian ! In me there is no longer any opposition between Hindu, Mussalman and Christian. Today every caste in India is my caste,

the food of all is my food.[23]

He becomes the disciple of Paresh Babu and he is ready to worship the Deity who is the God of no particular sect but the God of India herself.

The novel is thus brought to a happy consummation with two weddings and the triumph of the Brahmo creed. But every reader will echo the view of Dr. S. C. Sen Gupta :

> If Gora had been able to resolve the contradiction through a spiritual struggle, the story would have made a great novel. But Rabindranath betrays here an indolence about fundamentals ; rather than portray the intricate spiritual struggle that is aroused in Gora's heart, he ends it mechanically almost as soon as it begins.[24]

One might say of Gora as of Shakespeare's Prince Hal, "Never did reformation come in such a sudden flood."

This fundamental flaw apart, *Gora* is a fine novel. Tagore has made proper use of the principle that much more is gained than lost by taking the readers into his confidence. Thus while Gora himself makes the discovery of his British parentage only at the end of the story, the reader is taken into the secret at the very beginning. This produces the delicious effect of dramatic irony—an Irishman born of Christian parents becoming the uncompromising champion of Hindu orthodoxy and Indian nationalism.

Another merit of the novel is the skulful way in which Tagore has made his story vibrate to the reverberations of the political scene—the commotions caused by the Swadeshi movement, the conflict between the white rulers and the coloured subjects, police repression, imprisonment for political offences, etc.

Nor is the novel lacking in some excellent characterisation. The excesses of the Brahmo and orthodox Hindu are portrayed in Haran and Mahim, Mistress Baroda and Haramohini. Paresh Babu is a fine portraiture of unruffled patience and forbearance,

23 *Gora* (Macmillan, 1966), p. 406.
24 *The Great Sentinel* (Calcutta, 1948), p. 210.

generosity and tolerance, and unwavering adherence to vital convictions. But perhaps the best drawn character of the novel is Anandmoyi, the foster mother of Gora, whom he apostrophizes in the aptest words :

> You have no caste, you make no distinctions, and have no hatred. You are the image of our welfare ! It is you who are India ! [25]

10. *The Home and the World*

Gora is full of discussions of the political, social and religious problems which agitated the minds of the intellectuals of the period. Even so it is a novel of incidents as much as of ideas. But the next novel, *The Home and the World* (1915), can be described as a novel of ideas ; into it Tagore has put more of his criticism of life than into any other novel of his.

Bimal and Nikhil have been married for over nine years. Their wedded life is ideally happy. Her love for him amounts to worship and his love for her is as intense as hers for him. He wants to take her out of the *purdah*, for he believes that their love for each other could reach its fullest point in the outside world.

The opportunity for coming into the outside world soon arrives with Sandip and the Swadeshi movement. Sandip's eloquent public speech and his audaciously confident private conversation make an immediate conquest of Bimala's heart. Nikhil to whom means are as important as the end disapproves of Sandip's methods—exciting the hatred and fanaticism of the gullible masses and using coercion, intimidation and violence to achieve his object. Nikhil is also an advocate of Swadeshi and he has made great sacrifices, but he is not prepared to run amuck and throw to the winds the higher values which he cherishes.

This causes a rift between the friends, and Bimala is on the side of Sandip. Nikhil would not interfere with her independence. She and Sandip are mutually attracted. He praises her as his inspiring goddess and as *Sakti* that could achieve everything. He urges her not to let her moral precepts restrain the warmth of her natural passion. He passes from bare suggestions to broad

25 *Gora*, p. 407.

hints, the implied soon comes to be expressed. It is only by chance and luck that Bimala escapes toppling into the moral abyss to the brink of which she has been brought by Sandip.

In course of time, however, Sandip's cupidity, selfishness and gross sensuality become apparent to her and she begins to despise him. What bring home to her his wickedness are the pernicious influence he exercises over her young protege Amulya and her theft of Rs. 6,000 in gold from Nikhil's safe at Sandip's instigation. She confesses her crime to her husband, is pardoned by him, and they are fully reconciled.

But their happiness is short-lived. Sandip's campaign of hatred and violence produces bitter reprisals from the Mussalmans of the place. Realizing the danger to his life Sandip escapes. Violence breaks out and Nikhil rushes to the scene of the lawless acts and is wounded in the head. The story ends with the statement by the doctor that he could not say whether Nikhil would survive.

The Home and the World is both an autobiographical and a historical novel. Nikhil is Tagore himself in many respects, the views expressed by Nikhil on the political problems of the day are the views of Tagore himself.

About 1905 Tagore drifted into politics. He edited a magazine called *Bhandar* in which he discussed the important political problems of the day. At the time of the partition of Bengal, he became the active leader of the " One Bengal " agitation. But in course of time the movement passed into the hands of extemists and revolutionaries who were impatient of the slow and constructive methods he advocated. He therefore retired from active politics to the solitude of Santiniketan, and he was dubbed a coward and and a traitor.

This is the political background of the novel. The movement dealt with in the novel is, however, the Swadeshi movement. Here again Tagore was against all violent and extreme steps. These views of the novelist are expressed by Nikhil. The novel is thus both a tract of the times and a disguised autobiography.

If Nikhil represents Tagore himself, Sandip is the extremist who is impatient of the just and truthful approach of Nikhil to

all problems. "I am willing to serve my country," says Nikhil, "but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country."[26] These words sum up Nikhil's philosophy which guided him in his public life. Just as he wants the country to be free he wants human relations to be free,[27] and he allows his wife as much freedom as he wants for himself. All this excites Sandip's contempt. He describes Nikhil as a pale lotus-eater of idealism, a metaphor-monger dealing with words, not realities, one who roams about in cloud-land in idea-filled balloons.[28] He himself is an intellectual pervert and a juggler with ideas. By his brilliant sophistry he deludes others and occasionally himself. Strong men like himself, he claims, believe in taking what they wanted by force—even other people's wives! "That is really mine which I can snatch away"[29] sums up his philosophy. Nor do moral scruples and fine distinctions of right and wrong deter him from doing what his passions dictate. In public affairs, too, he believes that the end justifies the means. Looting, murder, blackmail—all these he would resort to in order to achieve his end. But in spite of all his vaunts, he is a weak man and he flinches and falters when, according to his own philosophy, he should have acted firmly.

The third principal character of the novel is Bimala. On the "home" front the story is the change that comes over her as she passes from the seclusion of home to the freedom of the outside "world." Nikhil correctly analyses her character when he says that her master passion is

> her infatuation for tyranny.... this infatuation is deep down in her nature. Her love is for the boisterous. From the tip of her tongue to the pit of her stomach she must tingle with the red pepper in order to enjoy the simple fare of life.[30]

In the end, however, she realizes her own folly, repents and returns to her husband. No doubt she serves to illustrate her creator's ideas, but she is, at the same time, a real woman. Her

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26 *The Home and the World* (1948), p. 28.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

motherly instinct, her typical feminine weaknesses—like her vanity in appearance and dress, her jealousies and her determination to be the mistress of the house—all these make her a truly interesting character.

Even the minor characters like Nikhil's master Chandranath Babu, the Bara Rani and Amulya are finely hit off.

The title of the novel is explained in the course of the story which is the emergence of Bimala from her home into the larger world. But some critics see a deeper meaning in the title and they regard the novel itself as something of an allegory. Says Hiren Mukerjee :

> Bimala represents India, Sandip with his aggressive western-style nationalism pulling her with a fierce charm in one direction, while Nikhil, more sedately and with a peculiar calm, trying to recall to her whatever was best in her own tradition.... In the contest as Tagore portrays it, Nikhil wins and Bimala goes back to him—a symbolic expression of what India's path of development should be.[31]

Its central theme, its noble ideas expressed in magnificent language, its autobiographical value, its sharp contrast of characters, and its presentation of the incidents from the different points of view of the principal protagonists as in *Ring and the Book*, all these make *The Home and the World* Tagore's greatest contribution in the field of fiction.

11. *Farewell, My Friend*

The later novels are definitely inferior. Of these we shall first consider *Farewell, My Friend*, the English translation by K. R. Kripalani of the Bengali original *Sesher Kavita* (literally, Last Poem, published in 1929). It tells the story of an Oxford-educated, intellectual, ultra-modern, sophisticated Bengali youth Amit. He meets Labanya at a hill station and they fall in love with each other. But Labanya is quite a different product of modern culture. She is a highly educated and supersensitive girl. Their intimacy works a great change in Amit.

31 *Himself a True Poem*, p. 85.

> It releases his own submerged depth of sincereity, which he finds hard to adjust to the habits of sophistry and pose practised so long. In the process he manages to strike a new romantic attitude. The struggle makes him a curiously pathetic figure—one who is being worked against his grain. The tragedy is understood by the girl who releases him from his troth and disappears from his life.[32]

(The last poem which she addresses to her lover gives its name to the novel). If this were the end of the story we should not have had much to complain. But Tagore thrusts a conventionally happy conclusion to the novel by marrying off the two lovers to those whom they loved earlier in life. Amita marries Ketaki, an Oxford friend of his, while Labanya goes back to Sobhanlal whom she had discarded for no fault of his. These marriages are artistically and psychologically a flaw. Like Shakespeare, Tagore seems to be in a hurry as he approaches the end of his work and wants to dispose of his characters in the easiest way possible.

The Bengali version of the novel, we are told, is noted for the sparkling wit of its dialogue, the half-mocking tone of its narrative, and "the winsomely whimsical verse"[33] interpolated into it. But to regard this novel as superior to *Gora* and *The Home and the World* (as some young Bengali readers did) is, as K. R. Kripalani says, "to prefer cleverness to genius."[34]

12. *Four Chapters*

The last novel we shall consider is also Tagore's last novel, *Char Adhyaya* (1934) translated into English as *Four Chapters*. It is, like *The Home and the World*, a story of personal relationships projected against a political background—the revolutionary movement which cast a spell on some of the finest youths of Bengal in the first decade of this century. Indranath, the revolutionary leader, admits the charming Ela to his party in order to attract

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32 K.R. Kripalani, Foreword to *Farewell, My Friend* (The New India Publishing Co., Ltd., London), p. 5.

33 Hiren Mukerjee, *Himself, a True Poem*, p. 86.

34 Translator's Foreword, p. 5.

young men to it. Atin also joins the party against his better sense because of his love for Ela. Although they love each other the party discipline prohibits their union. In course of time Ela comes under police suspicion. To prevent the possibility of the secrets of the party being wrung out of her by police torture, Indranath orders Atin himself to kill her. When Atin tells her what he has been ordered to do she entreats him to obey the order. The story ends with the sound of a whistle indicating the arrival of the police.

The book provoked a great deal of adverse criticism when it appeared. This was directed mainly towards Tagore's presentation of the revolutionary movement. We can understand a critic like Hiren Mukherjee censuring Tagore for recalling, as he says,

> the terrorist chapter in our national movement and pillorying it in a manner that hardly became the maker of *Gora* and even *The Home and the World*.[35]

There is, however, no inconsistency between the attitude of Tagore towards the means of achieving political objectives as expressed in *The Home and the World* and *Four Chapters*. He was at no time of the view that the end justified the means—the central principle of the revolutionary and communist philosophy. However Tagore himself answered his critics by pointing out that the only theme of the book is the love of Ela and Atindra and that the revolutionary movement merely provided their love with its special dramatic setting.[36] This is indeed true. In no other novel of his has Tagore described the passionate impetuosity of love with such frankness and fervour as here. We must remember that *Four Chapters* is not a Victorian or near Victorian novel as his earlier novels are.

13. Tagore's place among the novelists

Finally a word about Tagore's place among the novelists. Western criticism (not excluding that of Edward Thompson who deals with Tagore only as poet and dramatist) is inclined to

35 *Himself a True Poem*, p. 86.

36 Author's Note, *Four Chapters* (1950), pp. vi and ix.

dismiss them as the byproducts of a great poet. Aronson, for example, says that Tagore as a novelist would strike his European contemporaries as belonging to an order of artistic expression characteristic of the early nineteenth century.[37] It is difficult to understand, far less to agree with, the criticism of a novelist whose themes, technique, characterisation and even faults are modern.

Let me deal very briefly with these aspects. The themes of Tagore's novels are quite modern—as modern as a writer of his day could make them. The recurring theme of all his novels is the impact of western culture and ideas on Indian life. A study of his novels is thus of invaluable assistance to the social historian of the Bengal of the last decades of the last century and the early decades of the present. The change from the orthodox social customs of the Victorian era to the modernism of the first quarter of the twentieth century could not be better understood than by a careful study of the novels from *Binodini* to *The Four Chapters*. Many of them deal also with the political movements of this period. In a more general way, the novels deal with the eternally interesting and intriguing problem of human relationships, especially love and friendship. Few writers have dwelt with this problem with greater insight and subtlety than Tagore.

In the techniques employed by him also Tagore shows himself quite modern. He departs from the conventional narrative method, for example, in *The Home and the World* where he employs the multiple-narrative method most effectively. He has usually only a few characters in his novels but their interaction is studied and portrayed with a thoroughness that reminds us of the detailed psychological analysis of characters in the modern fiction of western countries. We have certainly in Tagore's characterisation what Ifor Evans calls the "exploitation of the individual personality...."[38] He is at his best in the portrayal of women. Binodini, Annapoorna, Kshemankari, and Anandamoyi together with the younger charming heroines will make a feminine portrait-gallery of which any painter with the pen could be proud.

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37 A. Aronson, *Rabindranath Through Western Eyes* (Allahabad, 1943), pp. 109–110.

38 *English Literature between the Wars* (3rd Edition, 1951). p. 3.

No doubt, there are grave defects in his novels, some of them being the characteristic defects of modern novels. His utter indifference to careful plot construction, the role of accident and chance in the complication as well as the unravelling of the plot, the sudden and unconvincing conversions and transformations, the abrupt conclusion—all these mar the excellence of his work. But these defects are more than set off by the merits we have mentioned—the quality of the ideas presented in them, the excellence of the major characters, the vivid delineation of contemporary life, and, not least, the exquisitely poetic language that perpetually enthralls the reader—all these certainly make his fictional work enhance the splendour of his multifaceted genius.